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MR. MATTHEW ARNOLD

AS

CRITIC AND POET.

(*READ BEFORE THE LIVERPOOL PHILOMATHIC SOCIETY*

30TH JANUARY, 1878).

BY

JAMES W. ALSOP, B.A.

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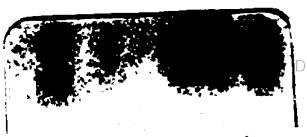

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MR. MATTHEW ARNOLD AS CRITIC AND POET.

ENGLISH Literature has never been famous in the department of criticism, and the union in one writer of marked power both in criticism and in original creation has been rare indeed. That there is nothing incongruous in such a union is proved by the Literature of Germany, where, in men like Goethe and Lessing, we see how critical activity of a high order has run with even steps by the side of original creation, has helped it and been helped by it. Yet the great poets of England have seldom been critics, and our critics have still more rarely been distinguished as poets. Dr. Johnson, the only great critic whom England produced in the eighteenth century—a period of intellectual rest, and therefore favourable to the exercise of critical energy—was nothing more than a critic. Dryden and Wordsworth, though both endowed with fine perception and discrimination, seldom cared to exercise their undoubted powers. Coleridge, poet, theologian, and social reformer as well as critic, allowed his subtle critical faculty to be pressed into the background by more absorbing occupations.

So far as I know, Mr. Matthew Arnold is as yet the only English writer of note who has not merely possessed, but habitually and successfully exercised, and preferred to exercise, both kinds of intellectual power. Dean Stanley calls him the first living English critic. Mr. Swinburne, attracted perhaps by the qualities in which his own verse, with all its beauties, is most deficient, places him in the very highest rank of intellectual poets, higher in some respects than

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Wordsworth. But it must not be supposed that Mr. Arnold draws a hard and fast line between these two lines of activity. He is not a critic one day and a poet the next; he is always both. In nearly all his works we find both powers united, yet helping, not thwarting, one another. He reminds us of such a man as Francesco Francia, of Bologna, now famous only as a painter, but who in his own day was almost equally celebrated as a worker in gold. Mr. Eastlake tells us that it was Francia's practice to sign his pictures with the word "Goldsmith" after his name, while he engraved "Painter" upon his golden crucifixes. Not less clearly does Mr. Arnold in his poetry shew that he is a critic, while in his criticism he stamps himself poet.

But it will naturally be asked:—Though Mr. Arnold may be both critic and poet, is he both in an equal degree? May not one faculty predominate over the other, so as to give a bent to his whole work, whatever form it may assume? Certainly it is the ordinary notion that Mr. Arnold is mainly a critic, though Mr. Swinburne appears to hold the opposite opinion. It seems to me, however, that the two powers are, as nearly as possible, equal, and that this equality results from a certain balance of apparently opposite and inconsistent tendencies very characteristic of Mr. Arnold's mind, and constantly shewing itself in one form or another in his works.

Mr. Arnold's chief critical efforts are his "Essays in Criticism," originally contributed to Reviews, and first collected in 1865, and his Oxford Lectures "On the Study of Celtic Literature," published in 1867. Before 1865 he had published in prose a Preface to a volume of his poems, an Introduction to his tragedy of "Merope," his Oxford Lectures on translating Homer, and several works on Education. The Introduction to "Merope," and the Lectures on Homer, well deserve perusal, but both are perhaps inferior in general interest to the remarkable Preface to his Poems, which

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contains Mr. Arnold's theory of dramatic and epic poetry, interesting not only in itself, but also for the light it throws upon the author's own poems.

Since the publication of the Lectures on Celtic Literature, Mr. Arnold's prose works have all had a more or less controversial tendency. In "Culture and Anarchy," published in 1869, he expounded at length his views upon culture, which had been already indicated in his Essays, but the greater part of the book consists of replies to the various objections made by persons of opposite views. "Friendship's Garland," published in 1871, is still more controversial, though written in a lighter vein.

Mr. Arnold had in the meantime ventured into the arena of controversial theology by publishing "St. Paul and Protestantism" in 1870; and from that time until 1877 his writings were chiefly upon religious subjects. "Literature and Dogma," "God and the Bible," and the "Last Essays on Church and Religion," followed one another in quick succession, and from their originality and boldness excited a good deal of interest. It does not fall within the scope of this paper to discuss Mr. Arnold's merits and demerits as a theologian. One may, however, be permitted to regret that the *odium theologicum* has, in so great a measure, prevented due appreciation of the masterly and delicate criticism, from a purely literary point of view, which, in "Literature and Dogma," is brought to bear upon the Bible, and which it must surely be a gain to possess, whether we believe that an ordinary literary standard is or is not the only one properly applicable.

It is unfortunate, however, that Mr. Arnold's later theological and controversial works have thrust into the background the "Essays in Criticism," and "The Study of Celtic Literature," which are almost free from personal controversy, and are among the most thoughtful, and at the same

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time most delightful, books of our generation. It is the more unfortunate, because the works by which Mr. Arnold is chiefly known are apt to give an imperfect, even an incorrect, view of his character. One often hears Mr. Arnold's criticism described as superfine and arbitrary; he is called half contemptuously, the Apostle of Culture, and it is supposed that by culture he means little more than a selfish dilettantism, that he withdraws himself, and seeks to make others withdraw themselves, from the serious business of life and the living questions of politics and social improvement, and that he would have his disciples bury themselves in a study, where they may read Bishop Wilson, or Sainte-Beuve, and carp at their neighbours, neither striving nor crying, but quietly waiting until in some unexplained way the Time-Spirit has brought those neighbours to their own exalted level. Now I think that to any fair-minded person who had read a considerable portion of Mr. Arnold's works, this idea of his position would appear ludicrous. But if one had read nothing but such a book as "Friendship's Garland," and that perhaps from a hostile standpoint, one might form some such conclusion without being open to the charge of exceptional stupidity. There is, no doubt, great charm of style about Mr. Arnold's controversial works, as about everything else that he has written; no one can, with such refined and polished satire, laugh down narrowness, selfishness, vanity, commonplace. But a sustained tone of satire is fatal to that perfect fairness which is the critic's first duty, and is sure to grate upon us before long, unless our author's opinions are adopted bodily as we read them.

Few writers, indeed, are at their best in controversy, especially personal controversy. We see men of unusually open minds, like Bentham, Macaulay, and Charles Kingsley, now and then losing all sense of fairness in the desire to demolish an opponent. Even a controversialist who stops

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short of these extreme lengths, does not usually express his own weighed and deliberate opinions; he dwells upon the weakness rather than the strength of the opinions attacked, though he may feel their strength too. His missiles acquire momentum, striking with a force not due merely to their intrinsic weight. And when he is using satire, it is too much to expect that, in the interests of truth, he will spoil all artistic effect by introducing those qualifications and exceptions which truth always demands.

For these reasons, I think that, in order to form a just opinion of Mr. Arnold as a critic, one must turn to the "Essays in Criticism," and "The Study of Celtic Literature." The style of both books is that of all Mr. Arnold's prose writings; it is simple, unaffected, clear, bright, animated; at times we are charmed by playful humour or subtle irony; yet there are also passages of deep pathos; while often rises to the surface the broad stream of earnest, but restrained enthusiasm which runs beneath even the lightest passages, and which is as far as possible removed from the cynicism with which Mr. Arnold is sometimes credited. This emotional vein distinguishes Mr. Arnold from the great French critics, Sainte-Beuve and Chateaubriand, with whom he has been compared, and who surpass him in brilliancy; and this same quality proves his intellectual kinship with the great living masters of English prose, Dr. Newman and Mr. Ruskin, who, perhaps, more than any writers whom this country has hitherto produced, deserve the epithet of "classic."

The "Essays in Criticism" are ten in number, and cover a considerable range of subjects, chiefly literary. Their scope is indicated in the first of them, on "The Functions of Criticism at the Present Time," and as this is, in fact, the key to most of Mr. Arnold's critical work, it may not be out of place if I briefly state his position as nearly as possible in his own words.

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Mr. Arnold defines criticism as the endeavour in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is. Criticism continually tends to make the best ideas prevail, ideas which, if not absolutely true, are yet true in comparison with those which they displace. It is, therefore, a work of analysis and discovery. Creative activity, on the other hand, is a work of synthesis and exposition. Its materials are ideas, the best ideas current at the time; these it presents in the most attractive and effective combinations, out of them it forms a work of art. Without ideas, creative activity can do little; and although critical activity is of a lower order, it may at certain times be the only activity possible, and may furnish the other with materials, thus making an intellectual situation by which genius can profit.

Applying this to our own country and our own century, Mr. Arnold points out that the stir of ideas in the period of the French Revolution, which might have been expected to give the necessary materials for a great creative epoch, failed to do so, owing to the political, practical character by which that Revolution was distinguished from the purely intellectual and spiritual movements of the age of Pericles and the age of Shakespere. It tried too much to enforce ideas, and so far as the rest of the world, especially England, was concerned, it produced an exactly opposite result; it hardened men's hearts against ideas. It produced a period of concentration, rather than of expansion. But now, Mr. Arnold maintains, an epoch of expansion is gradually coming on; it began first in Germany and France, at length it is extending to England; the long peace, the sense of security from foreign invasion, the spread of education, even the increase in material prosperity, are all tending to make us open to ideas and to give us an interest in them. What we want now, therefore, is sound criticism, such as will find out and make

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known the best that is known and thought on all subjects of human interest.

Now, it surely cannot be said that such a definition of criticism and its province is either narrow or unworthy. On the contrary, it is a noble one; criticism is distinctly a means to an end, and that end is what Mr. Arnold elsewhere calls "culture," the "pursuit of our total perfection." The chief mode by which we get to know the best that has been known and thought in the world must necessarily be by reading, but our reading must be systematic, not desultory, and it is the critic's duty to guide us to the best thoughts of the best men on all subjects.

Both the terms of Mr. Arnold's definition, and the spirit of his writings generally, shew that he includes in the word "culture" the education given by science and observation, as well as that given by literature. But one cannot help remarking how strong is Mr. Arnold's preference for literature over science as an educational agent; and, incomplete though either of them is without the other, it may, I think, fairly be contended that literature is the more important of the two. There is a temptation in these days of great scientific achievement to lay too much stress upon science as an instrument of education; she has advanced our material prosperity so much that we are inclined to credit her with at least an equal share in our intellectual development. But, in point of fact, she throws little light upon the religious, moral, and political problems of human life; she helps us but a little way towards the intellectual "detachment" which is one of the first requisites for our forming an adequate judgment upon these problems; she enlarges the universe for us, but, instead of solving its mysteries, she increases them.

It follows, from Mr. Arnold's idea of the function of criticism, that the main rule for the critic's guidance must be the one which he lays down, namely, *disinterestedness*; the

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critic must allow a perfectly free play of thought upon all the subjects which he touches, and that without bias of any kind. Mr. Arnold goes a step further; he says that the critic, in order to be disinterested, or at least in order to shew the world that he is disinterested (which is hardly less important), must keep entirely aloof from the practical view of things, and refuse to lend himself to the ulterior, practical, political considerations with which he has really nothing to do, and which he may safely leave to others. Criticism, it is true, thus condemns itself to a slow and obscure work, but it is by this means only that it can do effectual work. Even men of genius, like Carlyle and Ruskin, continues Mr. Arnold, have lost influence and power for good by intermeddling with political and practical questions, the one by his Latter Day Pamphlets, the other by his pugnacious Political Economy.

Many, no doubt, will find fault with this rule. They will say that, if criticism is to be really serviceable, it must not confine itself to principles and generalities, to past ages and distant countries; it must deal directly with the questions upon which, for the time being, men most need guidance. Dr. Freeman takes this view. He says, "Between history and politics I can draw no distinction. History is the politics of the past; politics are the history of the present." "The past is studied in vain, unless it gives us lessons for the present; the present will be very imperfectly understood, unless the light of the past is brought to bear upon it. In this way, history and politics are one."* True; but if we want an impartial view of a historic event, we do not go to a political pamphlet for it; we know that the politician's dominant wish must be to enforce his own theories; we believe that the historian's desire is to search out and give us the bare truth.

* Preface to "The Ottoman Power in Europe," pp. 8, 9.

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Certainly, if one looks at the instances in which men eminent in literature or science have taken an active part in politics, one is less disposed to quarrel with Mr. Arnold's maxim. It is not that such men have done no good in the political world; some of them, Mr. J. S. Mill for example, have done much; but the question is, whether the loss of influence for good which they necessarily sustain when they seem to lose their disinterestedness does not outweigh the good they actually achieve. Take the case of Dr. Freeman himself. One cannot help feeling that his recent violent advocacy of the Russian cause will tend permanently to lower the value of his historical works, even with those who believe his enthusiasm to have been well directed. And I must regretfully add, that Mr. Arnold has of late years lost much of his legitimate influence for good by abandoning at times the principle which he lays down so firmly, and dealing with certain political questions in a spirit which is narrow, if not unjust.

But in the "Essays in Criticism," at least, Mr. Arnold remains loyal to his own severe idea of disinterestedness. He studiously avoids practical questions, yet the reader acquires materials which will strongly influence him, consciously or unconsciously, when some day he comes to deal with such questions.

His favourite method is to select for his subject some writer of genius (by which he means one who, as he expresses it, has had a genuine gift for what is true and excellent, and is therefore capable of emitting a life-giving stimulus), and then to let that writer, as far as possible, speak for himself. The critic's office is not to intrude his own opinions so much as to select the best men, and then to present the best and most characteristic thoughts of those men. How different a view of their office had the critics of the last generation!

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Lord Macaulay begins his review of Périer's translation of Machiavelli's works as follows :—

"Those who have attended to the practice of our literary tribunal are well aware that, by means of certain legal fictions similar to those of Westminster Hall, we are frequently enabled to take cognizance of cases lying beyond the sphere of our original jurisdiction. We need hardly say, therefore, that in the present instance M. Périer is merely a Richard Roe, who will not be mentioned in any subsequent stage of the proceedings, and whose name is used for the sole purpose of bringing Machiavelli into court."

If Lord Macaulay had confined himself to suppressing M. Périer, one would not much complain; not content with this, he also suppresses Machiavelli; instead of allowing one of the most remarkable and interesting characters of a remarkable age to speak for himself, he stretches him upon the Procrustean bed of the "Edinburgh Review," and passes judgment upon his acts and theories according to the recognised canons of an English Whig—which is magnificent, but not criticism. We cannot help feeling that through Macaulay we only get a second-hand acquaintance with Machiavelli, or Chatham, or Bacon; the light passes through a thick refracting medium, for which we have to make allowance, and for which we are never quite sure that we have made sufficient allowance. Mr. Arnold's aim, on the other hand, is to give us a first-hand acquaintance with his subject; imperfect, no doubt, it must be, but still, as far as it goes, he endeavours that it shall be first-hand. In this way he has written of Marcus Aurelius; of Spinoza; of Heinrich Heine, the talented Jew of Hamburg, the "brilliant soldier in the Liberation-War of humanity;" of Joubert, the Coleridge of France; of Maurice de Guérin, with his wonderful genius for the poetic interpretation of Nature; of Maurice's sister, Eugénie de Guérin, with her exquisitely balanced character, combining intellec-

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tual vigour with deep religious feeling, practical good sense with enthusiastic devotedness.

It will perhaps be said that Mr. Arnold's conception of the critic's functions is a humble one, that it requires little knowledge, gives no scope to originality, and must therefore be very easy to attain. Critics are not usually too humble, and it is refreshing to find for once a critic who errs through excess rather than deficiency of humility. But, in fact, it requires both a great deal of knowledge and a great deal of literary tact to put Mr. Arnold's method into practice—far more than to deliver final judgment upon all things in heaven and earth with the easy confidence of a Lord Macaulay. "The truth is," as Mr. Arnold says, "few people have any real care to analyze closely in their criticism; they merely employ criticism as a means for heaping all praise on what they like, and all blame on what they dislike." To analyze closely, one must follow principles, and be able to give one's reasons; here is the true field for originality, and here Mr. Arnold's creative power allies itself with his critical power, and for keen insight, fine distinctions, broad and fruitful generalisations, he is, to my mind, unequalled. One cannot make this apparent by such illustrations as would come within the limits of this paper; yet I am tempted to give one or two extracts from the Essay on Maurice de Guérin, whose genius as a poet lay, Mr. Arnold thinks, in his power of interpreting Nature.

"The grand power of poetry is its interpretative power; by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe, but the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them. When this sense is awakened in us, as to objects without us, we feel ourselves to be in contact with the essential nature of those objects, to be no longer bewildered and oppressed by them, but to have their secret, and to be in harmony with them; and this feeling calms and satisfies us as no other can. . . . . The interpretations of science do not give us this intimate sense of

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objects as the interpretations of poetry give it; they appeal to a limited faculty, and not to the whole man. It is not Linnæus, or Cavendish, or Cuvier, who gives us the true sense of animals, or water, or plants, who seizes their secret for us, who makes us participate in their life; it is Shakspeare, with his

'daffodils
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty;'

it is Wordsworth, with his

'voice . . . . heard
In spring-time from the cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides;'

it is Keats, with his

'moving waters, at their priestlike task
Of cold ablution round Earth's human shores.'"

But this is only one of the ways in which Poetry interprets for us, and in another passage Mr. Arnold describes the other:—

"Poetry interprets in two ways: it interprets by expressing with magical felicity the physiognomy and movement of the outward world, and it interprets by expressing, with inspired conviction, the ideas and laws of the inward world of man's moral and spiritual nature. In other words, poetry is interpretative both by having *natural magic* in it, and by having *moral profundity*. In both ways it illuminates man; it gives him a satisfying sense of reality; it reconciles him with himself and the universe. . . . . Shakspeare interprets both when he says,

'Full many a glorious morning have I seen,
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovran eye;'

and when he says,

'There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them as we will.'"

Here, we observe, a principle is laid down, illustrations are given; we have thus the means of testing Mr. Arnold's

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high tribute to Guérin (which, by the way, has been pronounced excessive by Mr. Swinburne), and we can also apply his principles to other poets, even to Mr. Arnold himself.

Take again the Essay on "Pagan and Mediæval Religious Sentiment." It is in no sense controversial; it simply describes and illustrates. Paganism, "the religion of the senses and the understanding," is contrasted with Mediævalism, "the religion of the heart and the imagination;" we are not merely told of the difference, but we are made to feel the difference, when Mr. Arnold translates for us an idyll of Theocritus, introducing a Greek hymn to Adonis, and, by its side, St. Francis's Canticle of the Sun. Then, he traces the revival of Pagan sentiment at the Renaissance, the counter-revival of Mediæval sentiment at the German Reformation, the reaction again in the 18th Century, and shews how each vein of sentiment, taken alone, is insufficient and one-sided, and how man needs, in order to satisfy his highest wants, a religious sentiment combining both. This train of thought is suggestive enough, but what I wish to lay stress upon is the method by which Mr. Arnold developes it, giving his readers the opportunity of testing it at every step.

Some of Mr. Arnold's most subtle criticism is contained in his Lectures on the Study of Celtic Literature; they are a plea for the scientific study of the language and literature of the Celtic races, which, in Mr. Arnold's opinion, have contributed a larger element to the modern English nation than is commonly supposed. Mr. Arnold has an evident sympathy with the Celtic races, partly because their cause is a lost one, partly because he thinks he perceives in them the quick and strong perception and emotion, the sentiment, the enthusiasm, in which he considers the pure German races to be deficient. But he shews how, through the want of German

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steadiness, the Celt has failed in everything that he has tried. He says :—

"If his rebellion against fact has thus lamed the Celt, even in spiritual work, how much more must it have lamed him in the world of business and politics! The skilful and resolute appliance of means to ends which is needed both to make progress in material civilisation, and also to form powerful states, is just what the Celt has least turn for. He is sensual, or at least sensuous; loves bright colours, company, and pleasure; and here he is like the Greek and Latin races; but compare the talent the Greek and Latin (or Latinised) races have shown for gratifying their senses, for procuring an outward life, rich, luxurious, splendid, with the Celt's failure to reach any material civilisation sound and satisfying, and not out at elbows, poor, slovenly, and half-barbarous. The sensuousness of the Greek made Sybaris and Corinth, the sensuousness of the Latin made Rome and Baiæ, the sensuousness of the Latinised Frenchman makes Paris; the sensuousness of the Celt proper has made Ireland.

* * * * * *

"And as in material civilisation he has been ineffectual, so has the Celt been ineffectual in politics. This colossal, impetuous, adventurous wanderer, the Titan of the early world, who in primitive times fills so large a place on earth's scene, dwindles and dwindles as history goes on, and at last is shrunk to what we now see him. For ages and ages the world has been constantly slipping, ever more and more, out of the Celt's grasp. 'They went forth to the war,' Ossian says most truly, '*but they always fell.*'"*

Mr. Arnold traces Celtic influence in our language, manners, art, religion, and finally in our poetry. Three characteristics of modern English poetry are, in his opinion, a turn for style, a vein of melancholy, and that "natural magic" which is defined in the extract from the Essay on Maurice de Guérin which I have quoted; all these he finds prominent in the remains of ancient Cymric poetry, all are wanting in German poetry, and he therefore concludes that we are indebted for them to a Celtic element in our nation.

* "On the Study of Celtic Literature," pp., 105–107.

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Arguments of this kind are perhaps not very conclusive; but the keen, suggestive criticism of English and German poetry which this, the finest portion of the book, contains, has an independent value. One feels, too, that it is not the criticism of a mere critic, it is also the criticism of a poet. And when we doubt Mr. Arnold's conclusions, let us not forget Joubert's maxim:—"One should be fearful of being wrong in poetry when one thinks differently from the poets." *

I have given examples of the creative, the poetic element in Mr. Arnold's prose writings, because it seems to me that it is upon this that his permanent reputation will for the most part depend. Mere criticism is chiefly important to the age which produces it; it is, and must be, relative to that age. Criticism sees things as they are, but then the things themselves change, and the critic's point of view changes too. But a great creative work may be valuable to many ages; it may, in an extreme case, be relative to all ages; in other words, it may be absolute. And, therefore, although Mr. Arnold's criticism may be as important to us as his poetry, one may safely predict that posterity will concern itself chiefly with the creative element in his so-called critical work, and still more with his professedly creative work, his poetry.

Mr. Arnold's first published poem was an Oxford prize poem, called "Cromwell," which appeared in 1843, but hardly rose above the ordinary level of such compositions. No more poetry appeared under his own name until 1853, when a volume was published, called "Poems, by Matthew Arnold," and in this were included a few productions which had been published anonymously some years before. A second volume followed in 1855, and a third, called "New Poems," in 1867. In 1869 appeared the first collected edition of his verse, and in 1877 the second, which is more

* Quoted in Arnold's "Essays in Criticism," 3rd ed., p. 332.

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complete than its predecessor, and includes all Mr. Arnold's mature work, except the classical tragedy, called "Merope," which was published separately in 1858, but, so far as I am aware, has not been reprinted.

In form these poems display a great variety. There are sonnets, narrative, dramatic, lyric, and elegiac poems; there are also numerous short miscellaneous pieces, which do not strictly belong to any of these classes, but may be described as the simple poetic expression of some thought or mood of the author. But it is noticeable that, although Mr. Arnold is so great a master of satire in prose, he never employs it in verse; he has not attempted a single satiric poem, and his verse is even more deficient in humour than Tennyson's. In his poetry he is always serious, often melancholy.

It is not surprising that this variety of form extends itself to Mr. Arnold's metres; few poets have contrived to bring together so many different metres in two moderate-sized volumes. There are classic metres, carefully elaborated, but always unsatisfying to a modern ear, accustomed to the more sensuous effects of rhyme; and there are modern metres of various orders, rhymed and unrhymed, regular and irregular. Mr. Arnold does not always adhere strictly to the ordinary rules of the metre which he happens to be using; he allows himself great latitude, and sometimes passes from one metre to another in the same poem. Still, upon occasion, he can keep closely enough to a metre, and a difficult metre too.

Probably Mr. Arnold's two finest poems, as regards form, are "The Scholar-Gipsy" and "Thyrsis;" they are connected in subject, and the metre, an elaborate one, is naturally the same in both. These poems are simply perfect in the graceful and poetic expression of thought and subdued emotion, and "Thyrsis" has a special interest for us from the fact that it commemorates the death of the author's intimate

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friend, Arthur Hugh Clough. I will give one stanza from the "Scholar-Gipsy":—

"Thou waitest for the spark from Heaven! and we,
Light half-believers of our casual creeds,
Who never deeply felt, nor clearly will'd,
Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,
Whose vague resolves never have been fulfill'd;
For whom each year we see
Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;
Who hesitate and falter life away,
And lose to-morrow the ground won to-day—
Ah! do not we, wanderer, await it too?"

As a contrast to this complicated metre, one may quote an instance of Mr. Arnold's unrhymed verse, very irregular, so irregular that it might almost be called rhythmical prose, but rapid, and not without a certain stateliness. It is from the beautiful poem called "Heine's Grave," and Mr. Arnold, combining, as is his wont, criticism with his poetry, is trying to sum up the strangely compounded character of the Heinrich Heine who is the subject of one of the "Essays in Criticism":—

"The spirit of the world
Beholding the absurdity of men—
Their wants, their feats—let a sardonic smile,
For one short moment, wander o'er his lips.
That smile was Heine! for its earthly hour
The strange guest sparkled; now 'tis passed away.

"That was Heine! and we,
Myriads who live, who have lived,
What are we all, but a mood,
A single mood, of the life
Of the Being in whom we exist,
Who alone is all things in one."

Mr. Arnold cannot be called a musical poet in the sense in which we speak of Shelley or Swinburne or Tennyson as

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musical. He relies upon the purely intellectual effect of the *meaning* of his words; they, consciously or unconsciously, add the sensuous effect of their *sound*. A musical poet has undoubtedly a great advantage over others; he appeals to a wider circle; he more strongly influences the mass of men; his music opens men's minds, and his ideas enter in. But he is subject to one great disadvantage; he is apt to be intoxicated by his own power over words, and to sacrifice thought to sound. And for this reason the work of a musical poet is commonly very unequal. Had Mr. Arnold's verse the music which more than all other qualities (except perhaps its elaboration) distinguishes that of Tennyson, it would now be a much greater power than it is; but then, probably, Mr. Arnold would not so uniformly have kept upon a high intellectual level. It is curious to notice how this view is confirmed when we come to compare Mr. Arnold's poems one with another. In general, those of his poems which are richest in thought are the least musical; when he has most to say, he least thinks of the mode of saying it. There is not much music in a stanza like the following, taken from one of his most thoughtful poems:—

> "Too fast we live, too much are tried,
> Too harassed, to attain
> Wordsworth's sweet calm, or Goethe's wide
> And luminous view to gain."*

Another compensation for Mr. Arnold's lack of music is his perfect lucidity of style. He is quite free from that great defect of modern poetry—obscurity. When Tennyson's poetry is most intellectual, as in "In Memoriam," when it is most emotional, as in "Love and Duty," it becomes obscure; we admire, but we are not sure that we quite understand what the poet means. Mr. Arnold's verse, though

* Stanzas in memory of the Author of "Obermann."

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pitched in an equally high key, is always transparent, like his prose; you may disagree with him, but you cannot misunderstand him.

In addition to a few fragments, Mr. Arnold has used the dramatic form in two complete poems, "Merope" and "Empedocles on Etna." "Merope" is the least characteristic of Mr. Arnold's poems. It is founded upon Greek legend, and follows with a fair amount of success the classic models, shewing careful study, faultless taste, and felicity of expression. But it is in no sense a great poem. Fettered as it is by the exigencies of imitation, it could only have been a great poem in the hands of a writer of genuine dramatic power, and in this Mr. Arnold is signally deficient. "Empedocles," where the subject is also taken from Classical Antiquity, though the form is by no means classical, is far superior to "Merope" as a poem, and contains passages of great force and beauty; but its parts hang so loosely together that it can hardly be called a drama, and of dramatic power in the conception of the characters there is very little. Mr. Arnold is even more below Browning as a dramatic poet than he is below Tennyson as a musical poet. He cannot make the imaginary heroes of his poems speak for themselves as he makes the real heroes of his critical essays speak; when now and then we seem to hear their voices, they are but echoing some one or other of his many moods of thought or feeling.

Mr. Arnold is more successful in his narrative poems, the finest of which are "Sohrab and Rustum" and "Tristram and Iseult." The one is a beautifully-told episode in one of the Tartar invasions of Persia; the other, founded on one of the Arthurian legends, possesses still greater pathos and beauty. We are conscious of a slight grating of artificialness in the elaborate similes of "Sohrab and Rustum," but this has disappeared in "Tristram and Iseult," changed into the

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simple naturalness of a deep passion, which does not search out similes in external objects, but stamps itself upon all things with which it comes in contact.

But the main interest of Mr. Arnold's poetry does not lie in the legend of Greece or Brittany which he recounts, whether in a dramatic or a narrative form. It lies in his own thoughts and feelings, in his views of man and nature; and for these we have to look at his poems as a whole, and more especially to his lyrics and elegiacs. Let us follow to some extent the distinction which he lays down in the passages I have before quoted from the Essay on Maurice de Guérin, and enquire in turn how Mr. Arnold deals with Nature and with the moral world.

With Nature he has a deep and wide sympathy, with the quiet softness of an Oxfordshire landscape as with the rugged grandeur of an Alpine pass. Nature, indeed, seems always at his elbow while he writes; he pauses in a narrative that he may dwell upon the beauties of an open forest glade; his thoughts of the dead whom he loves gather round a grave among the "scented pines of Switzerland" or on the shores of the "soft Mediterranean." When he wishes to indicate the relations of the different fine arts, he finds his illustrations in a walk through Hyde Park. To trace man's history from the childhood of the world, he pictures him in a ship borne down a stream, clear-flowing at its source in the mountain gorge, then passing through flat, unshaded plains, crowded with noisy cities, at last widening and becoming peaceful

> "As the banks fade dimmer away—
> As the stars come out, and the night-wind
> Brings up the stream
> Murmurs and scents of the infinite Sea."

It is, perhaps, too much to say that Mr. Arnold possesses that rare genius for interpreting Nature which he felicitously

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calls *natural magic*, although we have certainly glimpses of it where he speaks of a Swiss mountain as

> "Jaman, delicately tall
> Above his sun-warmed firs"—

and elsewhere of

> "The hum of torrent lone
> And brooding mountain-bee"—

and of

> "Some wet bird-haunted English lawn."

But Mr. Arnold has consummate skill, if not genius, in interpreting Nature, and that skill is as much due to patient and loving study as to original sympathy; like Tennyson, he has been a close observer, and speaks with knowledge of flowers and birds and the tints of an evening sky. He records what he has himself seen, in poetic language, but with Greek "moderation;" and is no more intoxicated with Nature, like Shelley, than he is intoxicated with music, like Swinburne.

Yet Mr. Arnold seems to study Nature less for her own sake than for the side-lights which she throws upon human life, and he is never weary of drawing lessons and illustrations from her. Take, for example, the following sonnet, called "Quiet Work:"—

> "One lesson, Nature, let me learn of thee,
> One lesson, which in every wind is blown,
> One lesson of two duties kept at one,
> Though the loud world proclaims their enmity—
>
> "Of toil unsevered from tranquillity!
> Of labour, that in lasting fruit outgrows
> Far noisier schemes, accomplished in repose—
> Too great for haste, too high for rivalry!

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"Yea, while on earth a thousand discords ring,
Man's senseless uproar mingling with his toil,
Still do thy quiet ministers move on,
Their glorious tasks in silence perfecting!
Still working, blaming still our vain turmoil,
Labourers that shall not fail, when man is gone."

But what is Mr. Arnold's position as a poetic interpreter of the moral and spiritual world?

In the first place, he has by nature a happy and rare combination of many-sided intellectual sympathy with earnestness and unbending morality. He is never cynical or flippant, is always anxious to receive new light, from whatever quarter it may come, and not even his detractors suggest that the standard by which he estimates conduct is below the very highest. This rare natural aptitude has been increased by the unusually wide range of his culture. One has not to read many of his works, whether in prose or verse, in order to learn how wide are his interests; art, literature, science, nature, philosophy, religion, all attract him. At first, probably, observing his affection for Homer and Sophocles, one is disposed to regard him as unduly influenced by the Greek mind; then one comes to think that he has been taken prisoner by modern Germany, by Goethe, Lessing, Heinrich Heine; after this one is surprised to find how much he has in common with men of such different natures as Dante, Spinoza, Shakespere, Luther, Voltaire, Joubert, George Sand, Falkland, Cromwell, Shelley, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Dr. Newman. One day you suppose him to be steeped in German Rationalism, the next you are astonished, perhaps relieved, to find him patiently studying Thomas à Kempis, or Bishop Wilson. As many-sided intellectual sympathies have led him to wider culture, so wider culture in turn has extended his sympathies.

Nature has also endowed Mr. Arnold with poetic genius,

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not indeed commanding, but considerable, and this also he has cultivated by study, and still more by wise restraint. He has not been led away by a fatal facility in verse-making to write when he has had nothing to say; every poem is based upon some idea, to which its form is subordinated. Hence it is that there are few poets whose complete works include so little that is weak or futile.

But the peculiar position of Mr. Arnold as a poet arises from his choice of subjects. He seldom selects the grand simple passions of humanity common to all ages and lands; these have been depicted by greater poets than he, and better than he could depict them; but he is attracted by the moods of thought and feeling which are characteristically modern, by the problems, the questionings, the complexities, the conflict of ideas, of civilised Europe in the nineteenth century. In this department it seems to me that no English poet, at all events none since Wordsworth, has done so important a work. Clough, Tennyson, and Browning are all narrower in their range; each has dealt at times with such subjects; but Clough died too young to achieve much; Tennyson ceased to concern himself with the complexities of modern feeling when he wrote the last line of "In Memoriam;" Browning has always taken rather a dramatic than a personal interest in them, and is equally attracted by the imagined feelings of an Italian artist or maiden centuries ago.

Simple natural passion Mr. Arnold can indeed depict with wonderful skill; we see this in "Sohrab and Rustum," and still more in "Tristram and Iseult," and "The Forsaken Merman," which are almost overburdened with pathos. "Mycerinus," and "Saint Brandan," smaller poems, are of the same order. Still his tendency is to depict, not simple emotion, but emotion complicated with modern thought. For example, there are two of Mr. Arnold's poems which are, *par excellence*, love poems, "Switzerland," and "The Buried

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Life." In "Switzerland," a young Englishman falls in love with a Swiss maiden, or rather, apparently, a French maiden living in Switzerland; after a hard conflict between love and duty, he forces himself to part from her, but the effects of the struggle are scarcely over, even when, ten years afterwards, he revisits the old scenes. Yet the conflict appears to spring from a peculiarly modern feeling, the supposed want of complete mental sympathy between him and his beloved—

> "But a sea rolls between us—
> Our different past!"

The power of that sympathy, when it does exist, is shewn in "The Buried Life," beautiful alike in thought and in expression, where the idea is that each man lives a life which is hidden from all others, and, in the whirl of affairs, even from himself, except in rare moments, when, in the sympathy of perfect love,

> "A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,
> And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.
> The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain,
> And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know!
> A man becomes aware of his life's flow,
> And hears its winding murmur, and he sees
> The meadows where it glides, the sun, the breeze."

This idea of the true meaning of life being lost in its whirl frequently recurs in Mr. Arnold's poems, and it is essentially a modern idea. It is closely connected with another modern idea, that of the conflict between the contemplative and the active life. In an age when the most cherished ideas of the past, intellectual, social, political, religious, are all being put upon their trial; when the spirit of scepticism, once regarded as savouring of evil, is, by a

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sweep to the opposite extreme, even accounted good for its own sake, those who have the deepest faith that mighty truth will in the end prevail, are most fearful lest, in working towards what they believe to be the truth, they may perhaps be unconsciously advancing error, and so retarding the cause which they have most at heart. They cannot say, with Kingsley,

"Soul! thou must work, though blindfold." *

They long for work, but are paralysed by the doubt whether they have really mastered the true position, and sometimes in despair they abandon action altogether. Mr. Arnold sympathises deeply with this conflict; his manysidedness enables him to perceive the strength and the weakness of the mood of thought which produces it.

It is no doubt dangerous to seek for a poet's personal experiences in his works, but one cannot help feeling (and Mr. Arnold's marked want of dramatic power confirms the view) that the conflict is one that for a long time Mr. Arnold felt strongly himself. He touches upon it frequently, and in two of his most thoughtful poems it forms the main theme.

There is a comparatively unknown work called "Obermann," a collection of imaginary letters from Switzerland, written by a Frenchman named Sénancour, who died some thirty years ago. This book powerfully influenced Mr. Arnold at one period of his life, and suggested the form, at all events, of the two poems I allude to, "Stanzas in memory of the Author of Obermann," and "Obermann once more." Sénancour was one of those men whose spirits are oppressed by this conflict to such a degree that they withdraw from everything practical, and the earlier of Mr. Arnold's poems

* "The Saint's Tragedy."

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(published in 1849) is one long regret that he cannot do likewise. He says:—

"Ah, two desires toss about
The poet's feverish blood!
One drives him to the world without,
And one to solitude.

"*The glow*, he cries, *the thrill of life!*
Where, where do these abound?
Not in the world, not in the strife
Of men, shall they be found.

"He who hath watched, not shared, the strife,
Knows how the day hath gone;
He only lives with the world's life
Who hath renounced his own."

Mr. Arnold, however, was not one of those who desire a life of lettered ease for its own sake, and when he wrote "Obermann once more" (stated to have been "composed many years after the preceding," and first published in 1867) he had come to see that, though hasty, ill-judged action may occasion mistakes, without action progress is impossible. He still realised and expressed the conflict of the two tendencies, but action had triumphed:—

"What still of strength is left, employ,
That end to make men gain:
One mighty wave of thought and joy
Lifting mankind amain!"

It is not surprising that the religious problems of our age should attract Mr. Arnold as they have attracted so many modern poets, and accordingly we find them suggesting many of his most beautiful poems. He does not import controversial theology; that he leaves to his prose writings specially devoted to such subjects; his themes are rather the emotions, and above all the conflict of emotions, which have grown out

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of the intervention of the modern spirit in religious matters. The regrets, the helplessness, the profound sadness, of a mind which, forced to give up an old faith, has not yet found a new one, are again and again powerfully and sympathetically expressed. Take, for example, the "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," written during a visit to the famous French Monastery, and suggested by the severe life of the brethren. I will quote two or three stanzas:—

"Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to raise my head,
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.
Their faith, my tears, the world deride;
I come to shed them at their side.

* * *

"Achilles ponders in his tent,
The kings of modern thought are dumb;
Silent they are, though not content,
And wait to see the future come.
They have the grief men had of yore,
But they contend and cry no more.

"Our fathers water'd with their tears
This sea of time whereon we sail;
Their voices were in all men's ears
Who pass'd within their puissant hail.
Still the same ocean round us raves,
But we stand mute and watch the waves."

So, too, in the short but exquisite poem called "Dover Beach":—

"The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."

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A poet who undertakes to depict emotions, especially complex emotions, of pain or doubt, usually accepts a thankless office. And although Mr. Arnold's genius perhaps displays its highest efforts in the pourtrayal of doubt, we all instinctively prefer those of his poems (and they are many) which assert with "inspired conviction" the noblest moral and spiritual beliefs of our time. Few things have been written by living poets finer than "Rugby Chapel," composed in memory of the poet's father. Take, again, the short poem called "Progress," where Mr. Arnold rebukes those who would make their supposed discovery of the falsehood of old formulas a ground for considering themselves released from the old moral law. He concludes:—

"Children of men! the unseen Power, whose eye
For ever doth accompany mankind,
Hath look'd on no religion scornfully
That men did ever find.

"Which has not taught weak wills how much they can?
Which has not fall'n on the dry heart like rain?
Which has not cried to sunk, self-weary man,
Thou must be born again!

"Children of men! not that your age excel
In pride of life the ages of your sires,
But that you think clear, feel deep, bear fruit well,
The Friend of man desires."

I fear that I have already made too many quotations, yet cannot resist the desire to make one more, though it loses much of its majestic impressiveness by being torn out of its proper place. It is from "Obermann once more," and Mr. Arnold is describing the transforming power exerted by early Christianity:—

"In his cool hall, with haggard eyes,
The Roman noble lay;
He drove abroad, in furious guise,
Along the Appian way;

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"He made a feast, drank fierce and fast,
And crowned his hair with flowers—
No easier nor no quicker passed
The impracticable hours.
"The brooding East with awe beheld
Her impious younger world.
The Roman tempest swelled and swelled,
And on her head was hurled.
"The East bowed low before the blast
In patient, deep disdain;
She let the legions thunder past,
And plunged in thought again.
"So well she mused, a morning broke
Across her spirit grey.
A conquering, new-born joy awoke,
And filled her life with day."

I have only been able to indicate a few of the moods of thought and feeling which Mr. Arnold has pourtrayed; one must read his poems as a whole in order to understand the wide range of his sympathetic insight. As in his criticism, so in his poetry, he can appreciate the strength of thoughts and feelings which he does not himself share. He can suspend his judgment; while feeling the agony of a state of doubt, he will bear it rather than escape it by embracing an opinion of which he is not fully convinced; he is disinterested and courageous, as one might expect a son of Dr. Arnold to be.

It is always dangerous to indulge in prophecies as to an author's future reputation, and, in the case of a poet who chooses for his themes emotions which are for the most part peculiar to one age, the difficulty is increased. Future generations will perhaps pay little heed to the problems which trouble us so much. But though Mr. Arnold's creative work, like his critical work, may be destined to decline in relative value as time goes on, yet both seem to me to possess the highest value to us, living in an age whose great want is

"To see life steadily, and see it whole."

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